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ABSTRACT

Ambiguity can be enjoyed in statements without context, in unclear comparisons, in words often confused, and in casual disorders. In spite of the grammarians' efforts to "disambiguate," it is doubtful that any willful act or combination of acts can eliminate ambiguity, since language is a system of symbols which can stand for one thing or another. Not only can our use of symbols create lexical ambiguity, but also phonetic ambiguity: homonyms, homographs, and homophones. Writers sometimes turn ambiguity to advantage through the use of metaphors, analogies, and other conceits. Or ambiguity can be used in puns wherein sense is not called for so long as some connection, however outrageous, is made. Other forms of humor also depend on ambiguity: irony, incongruity, satire, and phatic expression. Abuses of ambiguity exist as well where unintended ambiguity may lead to undesired or undesirable results. Whatever the case for ambiguity, it is deemed necessary for societies' coping with the world. Life's accidental, unexpected quality which irks yet delights should be the clue to the conclusion that ambiguity is inescapable. (HOD)

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# TWO CHEERS FOR AMBIGUITY

The boy was given the girl. She's a pretty little girl. She was entertaining. The detective looked hard.[1]

A passage from Hemingway? Or Dashiell Hammett or perhaps Ross MacDonald? You weren't fooled, of course, but you may have noticed a resemblance to the style of these authors. Ross MacDonald, for example wrote:

"You must be crazy. I don't even know any girls!"

"You know me," a woman said behind him.[2]

And here is a passage from the short story which Ernest Hemingway once placed at the head of a list of his stories:

> Perhaps he had been wrong. This was certainly the way to take it. You most certainly could not tell a damned thing about an American. He was all for Macomber again.[3]

Actually the first paragraph is not a passage at all but separate sentences used by Paul Roberts to illustrate the dangers of ambiguity. Roberts warns in another place: "...the writer can fall into this trouble quite easily. He can avoid it only by learning to be alive to the possibilities and to make sure his meanings are clearly signaled."[4]

Although a modern grammarian, Roberts joins the traditionalists who down ambiguity and praise clarity. The Tressler-Christ grammar series gives eleventh-grade students a long list of words "often confused because of their

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sound or appearance. Master them [the authors say] and you will take a long step toward safeguarding yourself against embarrassing mistakes."[5] And John Warriner, in his usual crisp, unambiguous way, warns ninth graders: "Your sentences should state clearly what things are being compared."[6]

As the only person in the world who has edited Tressler-Christ, Warriner, and Roberts, I am not about to declare that these authorities are wrong. Still, anyone can miss much of the fun in life by steadfastly and straight-facedly refusing to enjoy ambiguity in statements without context, in unclear comparisons, in words often confused, and in casual disorders. My defense of ambiguity is triggered not by the warnings of Warriner, Christ, and Roberts, but by the clanging employment transformational generative grammarians make of one of the least ambiguous words ever--disambiguate. When they tell me to disambiguate ambiguous sentences by going to the deep structure where lie all secrets, I balk. I am not at all sure that I trust deep-structure explanations but I do trust ambiguity.

I doubt that any wilful act or even any combination of wilful acts can eliminate ambiguity. Like language itself, ambiguity reaches deep into the roots of man's thought patterns. Ambiguity covers a lot of ground: it refers to any statement or situation that bears more than one interpretation. William Empson, on page one of The Seven Types of Ambiguity, writes: "In a sufficiently extended sense any prose statement could be called ambiguous."[7]

Language is a system of symbols. The elements of language--sounds, letters, words--are all symbols. Since a symbol is one thing that stands for another, language is born into ambiguity. One way to avoid this kind of ambiguity was

advanced satirically by Jonathan Swift. Lemuel Gulliver met a learned man who thought to improve language by abolishing words: "Since words are only names for things, it would be more convenient for all men to carry about them such things as were necessary to express the particular business they are to discourse on." He admits one drawback: "If a man's business be very great, and of various kinds, he must be obliged in proportion to carry a greater bundle of things upon his back." How, by this system, would Alan Shepherd describe his pioneer trip to outer space or his golf shot on the moon? How would Henry Kissinger describe his trip to China? How would you tell of future plans or programs or dangers? The duality of symbols usually doesn't trouble us because we move faster than a speeding computer from the system of symbolization to the system of referents. Every child learning to talk sorts out sounds and matches them up with referents. All the sounds of all known language have been discovered in the meaningless babble of babes. The infant, as he moves from the squiggy, amorphous ambiguity of the untamed natural world to the more controlled human world, picks out those sounds he finds useful and discards the rest. By the time he "takes a language" in high school he can no longer say those sounds he babbled as a babe.

But complete control and complete clarity are beyond human powers. The use of symbol creates both lexical and phonetic ambiguity. The roughly forty sounds of English, for example,are all we have from which to form hundreds of thousands of words. Our language is peppered with homonyms, homographs, and homophones:

"I'm going to Alaska to hunt bear."

"Well, don't catch cold."

There are even single words so ambiguous that they have dictionary definitions 180 degrees apart. Rationalize means both to use reason and not to use reason; cleave means both to stick to and to split apart; ravel is defined as "to unravel." Such words usually don't give us serious trouble: context almost always provides necessary clues to the meaning. One main source of confusion is the melding of lexical and phonetic ambiguity. When we speak the sounds symbolized as /bâr/, we can mean bear, the furry animal; bear, to carry; or bare, naked, or to make naked. Etymologically these are three different words. The reader must choose between the first two; the listener must choose from all three. So readily, however, do we live with ambiguous possibilities that we nearly always choose the right /bâr/ without batting an eye (or an ear?).

But lexical and phonetic ambiguity reach beyond pairs like bear/bare. Thousands of words sound almost like others:

"What station is this?"

"Wembly."

"Oh. I thought it was Thursday."

"Me too. Let's get off and get a drink."

When we speak we don't generally bother to complete sentences or even words: each omitted or slurred sound and word creates its own semantic breach through which ambiguity may seep, or flood. Because as listeners we insist that language communicate, we tend to fill in whatever meanings seem most probable. Sometimes the results are funny, sometimes tragic, sometimes only annoying.

Even when we carefully guard our enunciation and pronunciation, we can

find ourselves wandering in odd hidden bogs of meaning. We use words differently from the ways our parents, grandparents, and other remote ancestors did. Words become layered in meanings as onions are layered in flesh. When we read Shakespeare or the Bible, we get flummoxed by the common words with common, everyday meanings. When we hear Hamlet tell Ophelia, "Get thee to a nunnery," or when we read that God is awful, we think we understand. But when those lines were written, the words nunnery and awful had meanings significantly different from the modern ones.

In the best-known book on General Semantics, S.I. Hayakawa gives the example of broadcast. About 1921 its principal meaning switched suddenly from "spreading seed" to "sending out radio waves." The word is obviously a compound of broad and cast, indicating even earlier meanings. To move in the opposite direction in time: the radio listener of the Twenties would be confused at the TV viewer's expression watch a broadcast. Since we usually retain old meanings, at least for a time, broadcast today ambiguously carries all three meanings and contains the metaphorical remains of the two earlier and still extant words.

Ambiguity lurks even in proper names, designated traditionally as the names of "particular" persons, places, or things. The person named shares the reference with everyone whoever bore the name. Most of us go through life shadowed by cognominal confusion. Marys or Johns have more trouble than most; Adolphs and Benitos have their own particular crosses to bear. Mary, of course, is especially popular in Catholic communities, while surveys of birth records assure us that Adolph is no longer popular anywhere.

Like most other words, proper names have their seasons. Although Shakespeare's warrior Hotspur was a Percy, no American boy wants to be called Percy. Proper names call up connotations not only of other names but also of other words: witnesses bear names like Lipschitz, Hogg, Hoar, and Backhouse. The noted black leader Walter F. White turned this evocative quality to advantage when he wryly entitled his autobiography, A Man Called White.

The type of ambiguity grammarians hate most is the syntactic kind. To avoid this language trap, modern linguists depend on a creative criterion, which they call the intuition of the native speaker of the language. Unfortunately, this test often fails to prevent intelligent and educated native speakers from creating syntactic ambiguities. For example, when a respected university chose as its motto "We believe in doing what we do well," the scholars who chose and those who applauded must not have seen the ambiguity.

High school and college teachers of composition find ambiguities in nearly every paper they correct, even though the writers are nearly all native speakers who intend to write clearly. Norman C. Stageberg explains that the student makes this kind of mistake because he has not developed "reader awareness: he does not learn to step outside himself and survey his words as with the mind of another person."[9]

Empson's criterion for ambiguity is that "somebody might be puzzled, even if not yourself."[10] This distinction is critical. The closed grammar system of the modern linguist is, in effect, a fiction when applied to what you or I say: any syntactic system is actually an idiosyntax, the system of only the writer himself. Whenever in a tight spot, the transformationalist refers to his own intuitions, which he labels "those of the native speaker." He might

better admit that any two native speakers are almost certain to interpret a series of statements in different ways. Sometimes these differences are only slight and not significant; other times the interpretations differ enough to create ambiguous situations and misunderstandings. It then becomes the sworn duty of grammarians, editors, critics, lawyers, and other language hustlers to disambiguate.

Writers sometimes turn ambiguity to advantage. Poets deliberately seek the ambiguity of metaphor, analogy, and other conceits. Loved ones, especially women, turn up in peculiar parallels and guises. Will Shakespeare strangely requests: "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" What girl (or boy, for that matter) could refuse? Other examples abound:

"Oh, my love's like a red, red rose."

--Burns

"She is the violet,
The daisy delectable,
The columbine commendable..."

--Skelton

Perhaps Thomas Campion is the champion of metaphorical transformation in his brilliant song:

"There is a garden in her face,
Where roses and white lilies grow,
A heavenly paradise is that place
Wherein all pleasant fruit do flow..."

It evades the issue to argue that since poets and their readers use metaphor

deliberately, they are not dealing in ambiguity. Empson, poet as well as critic, writes that "all good poetry [is] supposed to be ambiguous."[11] Robert Frost must have been pulling his questioner's leg when he answered about the meaning of one of his poems: "If I had wanted to mean something else, I should have said it."

Metaphor is ambiguity: the point of metaphor is that there is not only a possibility but even a necessity to interpret a statement or a situation in various ways. We can't interpret "a garden in her face" the same way we interpret "a pie in her face" or even "her potato face."

An ambiguous literary relative of metaphor is displacement, the theory that intuitive awareness of symbolic emotional experience lies at the heart of much myth, legend, and poetry. Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass," with its references to grass-covered graves, hints of rebirth. Sigmund Freud carried displacement into psychoanalysis with his recognition of common emotional experiences which he classified as the Electra complex and the Oedipus complex.

Much of metaphor has a homey rightness that sinks into the language; we lose consciousness of the metaphor. Man, noticing hundreds of real or fancied parallels to his bodily structure, has coined hundreds of phrases that have become "dead" metaphors: head of the company (or of cabbage), eye of the hurricane, mouth of the river, arm of the government, elbow macaroni, shoulder of the road, artichoke heart, body of literature, knee of the tree, foot of the bed. Empson again: "Metaphor, more or less far-fetched, more of less complicated, more or less taken for granted, (so as to be unconscious), is the normal mode of development of a language."[12] Language then is built like coral, on the body

of dead metaphors.

One result of school English is that students sometimes become convinced that metaphor hasn't been used since Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett fled from bleak Wimpole Street to sunny Italy. In some classrooms, though, students learn that metaphors do still appear, most fervently on the sports page, where Len Dawson tosses long bombs, "Boom, Boom" Geoffrion blasts holes in one kind of net, Pancho Gonzales booms cannonballs across another kind of net, and a once-potent baseball team is still occasionally referred to as the Bronx Bombers.

Other teachers, even more venturesome, demonstrate the ambiguity of popular songs: What and where in the world (or out of this world?) are "the windmills of your mind"? Or the "back roads of your mind"? Or even "the canyons of the mind"? What makes Jesus Christ, like Mrs. Robinson's friend Jolting Joe, a Superstar? What is Lucy in the sky doing with diamonds? Lucy is a prime example of one man's metaphor being another man's meat. Some drug-conscious adults are convinced that "Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds" is underground pop-culture code for LSD. When the Beatles were queried about this theory, composer John Lennon told a wide-eyed tale about the drawing a little girl made and showed to her daddy. These days there is, of course, much suspension of the willingness to disbelief, much fear of being put on, off or down: despite Lennon's explanation, LSD still sounds more likely.

Often, as in the Lucy case, we stick by the explanation that demands ambiguity rather than accept straighforward explanations. Man's intuition seems to be that a straightforward explanation can't be the right one. Our mental Gordian knots resist Ockham's razor. Despite Dr. Ockham's warning to the con-

trary, people continue to multiply concepts and assumptions beyond necessity.

In part this obstinacy may result from the fact that ambiguity, unlike perfection, can be fun. Or--to illustrate in the worse way--can be pun. Puns are fun for everyone. They are quick and demand enough intelligence to see weird connections. Rowan and Martin have made the rapid-fire pun a national pastime, but the pun goes back to Joe Miller's jokebook and beyond to Aristophanes of The Birds and Apuleius of The Golden Ass. The beauty of punning ambiguity is that sense is not called for so long as some connection, however outrageous, is made. A student wrote this on a recent paper:

> The top TV show is Rowan and Martin's Punanza.

A reader of the Saturday Review found this one on a Presbyterian Church in Los Angeles:

> Read your Bible. It will scare hell out of you.[12]

Other forms of humor also depend on ambiguity. One definition of humor is the bringing together of incongruous elements; recognition of incongruity depends on ambiguity. The viewer sees simultaneously two situations, the clashing perhaps of two conflicting life styles: the beautifully turned-out young lady speaking Brooklynese, the banker reading Superman comics, the sister-in-law of a president pushing a dignified advisor, fully dressed in dress clothes, into a swimming pool.

Another form of good sport is irony, ambiguity epitomized. When Marc Antony said, "Brutus is an honorable man; so are they all, all honorable men," he meant what he said in one way--a way that sharpened his later point that these honorable men did, in the assassination of Julius Caesar, act most dis-

honorably. Shakespeare loved this kind of irony which accepts two truths at once: Macbeth intones, "So foul and fair a day I have not seen"; Henry IV addresses his son as "my nearest and dearest enemy"; the duke in As You Like It proclaims, "Sweet are the uses of adversity." Students today are as fond of irony as was Shakespeare's school boy "crawling like snail unwillingly to school." They put each other down with remarks like "Thanks for nothing" and "Do me a favor; don't do me any favors" and "If you don't know, I'm not going to tell you."

A small step leads from the ambiguity of irony to that of satire. The success of Mad magazine may stem from its ability to make satire funny. Most often the satirist is made bitter by the two parts of the world that he brings together, by the ambiguity he builds. Dean Swift's Modest Proposal is really a Monstrous Proposal. The economics of English lords eating Irish babies is all the more devastating because it sounds so commonsensical: the poor infants are starving, English landlords have money and can use the meat. They can live off the poor, as it were.

There remains a final kind of purposeful ambiguity, a kind we use every day and all day, usually unconsciously. This form may be the least ambiguous illustration of the human need for ambiguity. It is phatic language, defined by Thomas Pyles as the "everyday small talk we use to establish rapport, make contact with our fellows, and assure mutual good will."[13] Phatic exchange is a human necessity. We say "Good morning" when it's blowing up a storm. We ask "How are you?" when we'd rather not know. We engage in dialogues like this:

"Nice seeing you again. Let's have lunch together soon."

"Yes, let's."

"I'll give you a call one of these days."

"Fine. I'm looking forward to it."

This may all be double talk but it is better than that talk that leads to trouble, to violence.

Although the ancient Greek ancestor word of phatic means "talking," the talking itself counts for little. It could as well be growls, groans, nudges, punches, pats, winks, or kicks. Phatic conversation is both iceberg and ice-breaker; the visible part allows people to say what they can't say straight out. Dr. Karl Menninger tells of the friendly young man who comes up to the roadside where we're changing a tire and asks: "Got a flat tire?" The young man could say, "I'd like to help you fix the tire"; but, as Menninger explains, "People are too timid and mutually distrustful to be so direct. They want to hear one another's voices. They need assurance that others are just like themselves."

S.I. Hayakawa explains: "Many situations in life demand that we pay no attention to what the words say, since the meaning may often be a great deal more intelligent and intelligible than the surface of the words themselves."[15]

Sweet are the uses of ambiguity--metaphor, humor, irony, phatic exchange. Yet abuses by ambiguity do exist. Unintended ambiguity leads to undesired and even undesirable results. There is a story about the early days of the Civil War when Union commanders in the South carefully observed civilian property rights. One cold night after a day-long march a New Hampshire regiment of the Army of the Potomac bivouacked in a Virginia field surrounded by a four-tiered split-rail fence. The men asked if they could use the fence rails to make campfires. The division commander reluctantly conceded: "All right. But take only the top rail in each section." When the general rode back an

hour later, the fence rails were all gone; yet none of the New Hampshire boys had disobeyed the letter of his order.

The general's order typifies the brand of ambiguity that bothers grammarians, teachers, and other purists like writers for Time magazine. One Time-server recently began a movie review: "'Ambiguous,' appropriately, has two definitions. It means 'capable of being understood in two or more senses.' It also means 'uncertain, especially from obscurity or indistinctness.'"[16] The reviewer's point was that a leap for the first category often ends in a fall into the second.

I looked up ambiguous in four desk dictionaries. Three, like the Time writer, give the two-or-more senses meaning first; the fourth is Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary, where "the earliest ascertainable definition is placed first."[17] The other three dictionaries list definitions in the order of frequency of usage rather than in chronological order. These three dictionaries show that the unfavorable connotation is losing favor; people are now employing the word ambiguous in a more favorable sense. Ignoring continual warnings from grammarians and educationalists, people are moving, even if unwittingly, toward a favorable attitude toward amiguity.

The more chances there are to be confused by ambiguous constructions, the more we seem to generate them. Norman C. Stageberg lists twenty kinds of ambiguity from "a dull boy's knife" to "She told me Joe had come, which pleased me."[18] Without even thinking about it, we tend to compensate for these structural ambiguities by switching around the grammar of what we read and hear. As William Empson writes, "Words are seen as already in a grammar rather as letters are seen as already in a word, but one is much more prepared to have been wrong

about the grammar than about the word."[19]

Next to grammar books, headline English is the prime source of this type of ambiguity. You can find this sort of thing in any issue of any newspaper. In one issue of a local paper I found:[20]

Program Changes for Brookside, Yorktown High

Unit Forms to Uphold "Quality" in Lakeland

Phase Out of Roa Hook Dump Is Pressed

Labor Scouts Democrats

Even though some sentences strain to fit the Procrusteam case, Stegeberg's score of structural ambiguities are amusing and instructive. For example, Number 13 is the familiar type "I like my roommate as well as Janice," which parallels John Warriner's previously noted "I like her better than Isabel." Here is the way Werriner handles her and Isabel:[21]

NOT CLEAR I like her better than Isabel.

BETTER I like her better than I like Isabel.

OR I like her better than Isabel likes her.

The BETTER meaning is probably meant nine times out of ten. A case that holds nine times out of ten isn't terribly ambiguous; textbook writers make laws whose holding power is much lower. For example, John Warriner himself gives the spelling rule "Keep the final e before a suffix beginning with a consonant"[22] and follows it by six examples and eight exceptions, two more exceptions than examples. And Warriner's improved Isabel sentences both need disambiguating: Who is "her"? What does "like" mean here? How does one person know how much a second person likes a third person?

My speculations and arguments here are general questions. They are not intended to refute John Warriner or other writers of traditional school grammars.

These grammarians are not cribbed by the confines of conventional textbooks. Henry I. Christ, for one, writes on General Semantics as well as on grammar. In a recent article[23] in EJC. he describes the disparity between the rigid classifying "boxes" of language and the category-eluding reality of the "real world": "The poodle doesn't know or care that it is classified differently from the mongrel down the street. After the biologists divided the world of living things into animals and plants, they discovered examples that seemed to fit both categories. Our classifications attempt to manage nature by putting everything into a convenient box, but that box is man's, not nature's."

The transformational grammarians have sensibly taken up Dr. Ockham's notion: if there is more than one logically possible explanation of a phenomenon in language, linguists tell us to choose the simplest explanation. Nevertheless, human expression is so various that ambiguous language situations exist where the rule of simplicity would decree no ambiguity. Noam Chomsky, gives as illustration[24] two sentences where one semantic interpretation seems to serve both and where a single transformation rule should explain all. But simple substitution wrecks explanation and throws discovery of the rule--if one exists--beyond our present ability. Chomsky's two sentences:

1. I never saw a man taller than John.

2. I never saw a taller man than John.

All right so far. Then Chomsky substitutes in Sentence 1:

3. I never saw a man taller than Mary.

Still all right, even if unlikely. But then Chomsky gives us:

4. I never saw a taller man than Mary.

No syntactic explanation we know of fits this construction. We can only assume that some hidden syntactic ambiguity lurks within the first two sentences; some element makes the same-seeming meanings different.

In his biography of Dostoevsky, Andre Gide writes: "We exist on given premises, and readily acquire the habit of seeing the world, not so much as it actually is, but as we have been told and persuaded it is." Another way to make the same point: our view of the world is the ambiguity we accept, the ambiguity we must accept in order to stand the world. We must understand to stand. Our senses are selective of the world; so are our words. We can't know everything; we don't need to know everything; we don't even want to know everything.

One hopeful sign these days is that people are beginning to admit the necessity--even the desirability--of living with ambiguity. Recently the lead theater review in the New York Sunday Times bore the headline:"'Antigone' Needs More Ambiguity."[25] The reviewer, Walter Kerr, declares the performance flat and unprovocative because the director, by presenting Antigone as chastely right and Creon as rantingly wrong, has refused "to show us any possible ambiguity in a play that is nearly all ambiguity."[26] "Life," says Kerr, "is a maddeningly fluid business, turning firm ground to soft, shifting as masses under the ocean shift or as faults that produce earthquakes shift, altering its center of gravity without warning--crawling, prowling, evolving, changing."[27] Kerr finds the play's message in the speech:

> I cannot say
> Of any condition of human life, "This is fixed,
> This is clearly good, or bad."

Without ambiguous situations if life there would be no suspense, no surprise,

no spice that springs from variety. One reason for the horror with which people greet suggestions of tampering with human genes is that the results promise to be monstrously perfect as well as perfectly monstrous. If we could perfect human stock, we would live in a sci-fi fantasy world lacking in human interest and human opportunity for human fulfillment. Perhaps even death would be unnecessary: Coleridge's Nightmare Life-in-Death would no longer be merely a personification but would be the lot of every weary human individual--or, better, nonhuman nondividual.

Life's accidental, unexpected quality which irks yet delights should be the clue to the conclusion that ambiguity is inescapable. Nature is ambiguous, the world is ambiguous, society is ambiguous. And as we have seen, language is ambiguous in at least three distinct and significant ways.

Possibly the most ambiguous language of all is modern English with its shedding of old inflections and its loosening of conventions in both speaking and writing. You can try to fight the inevitability of ambiguity, or you can relax and let it wash over you. "The word," say the General Semanticists, "is not the thing." The more we push the false one word/one thing notion, the more grief we pile into, the more misunderstanding we pile up. In these days when ambiance is a favored word and ambivalence a desired state, why not give in to the joy of <u>not</u> disambiguating? After I thought I had neatly pegged the transformational grammarians as inveterate, unbending disambiguaters, I ran across Jacobs and Rosenbaum's latest work, <u>Transformations, Style, and Meaning</u>. In the very first chapter comes the sentence: "Ambiguity is a universal property of language."[28] So much for that generalization!

Robert Louis Stevenson, a writer more familiar than most with the Jekyll/Hyde nature of our language, once wrote in mock despair: "The world was made before the English language and seemingly upon a different design." And therein lies the case for, and the use of, ambiguity.

Walter Holden
16 August 1971

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